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Statements and speeches

The Arts in the Canadian Community

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By Timothy Porteous,
Associate Director,
The Canada Council

The Arts in the Canadian Community

At this annual meeting of the Canadian Music Council, I would like to talk about the role of music and the other arts in the Canadian community.

Had I been making this speech a year ago there would have been little reason to question the existence of a Canadian musical community, or to be concerned about its survival. Since then, we have witnessed the election of a provincial government which believes that it is desirable, if not essential, for one quarter of that community to withdraw from its present association with the rest. This has compelled us to re-examine our assumptions about the political structure of this country. It should also cause us, I believe, to make a profound change in our attitude towards the role of culture in our society.

English Canadians are accustomed to thinking of their governments, in peacetime, as being primarily concerned with economic and social problems. It is difficult to adjust to the idea of a political party and a government whose fundamental preoccupation is cultural. Yet it is this, and not merely its political objective, which makes the Quebec government so different from all other Canadian governments.

Let us consider some of the ways in which this difference has manifested itself over the past six months. The Quebec Prime Minister has named four super-ministers, one with responsibility for cultural development, and to this post he has appointed one of his closest collaborators. This is in addition to the Minister of Culture who heads a department with almost 1,000 employees. A cultural development committee of four cabinet ministers has been set up which "will enable the full cabinet to understand the cultural implications of its decisions and permit the State to be the living conscience of the nation." There is no comparable structure in any other province. Despite severe restrictions on its budget, the Quebec government managed to provide one of its few substantial increases, almost 30% over last year, to its Department of Cultural Affairs. (Musicians may be interested to learn that this includes an increase of 47% for the performing arts, most of which will go into a touring program.)

The unprecedented importance accorded to cultural development follows logically from the government's commitment to political independence. For independence is necessary, according to the Parti Québécois, not for economic advantage, but to protect Quebec's culture. Economic disadvantages, if any, will be outweighed by cultural benefits. This point of view is difficult for most English Canadians to understand since it is the exact reverse of the prevailing attitude in their own society.

By now it should be clear that economic considerations, by themselves, will not be sufficient to preserve our national community. We must show by our attitudes and our actions that the existence of such a community, far from constituting a threat to a province or a language group, can be a source of strength and enrichment for all of us.

What has been the response to this challenge to our accepted order of social and governmental values? One would have expected a searching examination of the whole cultural dimension of this country, and, on the part of those who believe in preserving our federation, a determination to improve and strengthen those cultural activities which bring us together.

Instead most public comment has concentrated on the economic issues. In Ottawa the familiar ominous rumours are circulating about even more severe cutbacks in the budgets of cultural agencies next year - on the traditional grounds that cultural activities are not really essential in a time of economic difficulty. Several prominent public figures have advocated dismantling or diminishing the federal role in culture, and, by implication, the cultural dimension of our federation. This was recommended by the Honourable Pat McGeer, the Minister of Education of British Columbia, and by Simon Reisman, former Deputy Minister of Finance of Canada.

In a recent speech in Quebec City, the Leader of the Opposition, Joe Clark, seemed to be adopting this point of view. He said, "No Ottawa bureaucrat, only the government of Quebec, can be given (the) responsibility (for growth of Quebec culture). That government must therefore have the necessary power and resources to truly influence the development of the Quebec culture." I am sure we would all agree that the Quebec government, and for that matter every provincial government, should have the power and resources to influence the development of culture within its borders.

Does Mr. Clark really believe that the provinces, including Quebec, do not already enjoy this power, or that there are any limits, other than their own priorities, on the resources they could use for this purpose? As an example, even with the increase previously mentioned, Quebec spends less than half of 1% of its budget on its Department of Cultural Affairs. There is no constitutional reason why this amount could not be greatly increased. The same could be said for the other provinces. Does Mr. Clark believe that the existence of cultural activities which go beyond provincial boundaries pose a threat to those which take place within them? To take some concrete examples, does he believe that the Canadian Music Council, or the Canadian Music Centre, or the Canadian Conference of the Arts, or the

Touring Office of the Canada Council, or the Art Bank, or the French network of the C.B.C. (all of which are partly or wholly manifestations of the federal role in culture) restrict or undermine the arts in Quebec? If so, it is time that somebody pointed out that these institutions are enlarging the opportunities available to Quebec artists and the opportunities of Quebecers and non-Quebecers alike to enjoy their work.

In other words, these well-intentioned federalists, probably unknowingly, seem to have accepted the separatists' basic premise - that a federal system does not offer cultural advantages to its component parts. Most of us who have taken part in national cultural activities and organizations are convinced by our experience that the contrary is true - that such activities offer a scope and richness beyond that which is found in those less broadly based. We also know that although much has been achieved within the artistic community, much more could and should be done.

We could easily expand the number and range of the tours which bring musicians and other performing artists from one community or language group into contact with audiences from another. I am thinking not only of such prestigious events as the cross Canada tour of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra but of the equally valuable contacts established by such tours as that of the Ensemble Instrumental du Québec

in the B.C. Interior. We could encourage community festivals which bring together artists and visitors from different parts of the country. We could greatly increase travel to artistic events by young people and by those with a common professional interest. We could set up a national network of artists-in-residence which would bring artists from one province or region to live for a year or two in another. These are just a few of the many ways in which we could make better use of the artistic resources which we share as Canadians.

Anyone who reads the newspapers or watches television these days will be familiar with the economic arguments for confederation. But who is speaking of the cultural advantages?

Who is arguing that artists, whether French or English-speaking, are best protected from political pressures by the existence of alternative sources of funds? That our composers, choreographers and visual artists can benefit from a market which is larger than any single province? That many of our performing artists depend on tours which regularly take them from one ocean to the other?

Who is pointing out that in government support of the arts in this country it is the federal government that has provided the leadership and may well continue to do so? That what we need is not a contraction of the federal role but an expansion of the provincial and municipal roles, and of the growing partnership between all three levels of government?

Who is affirming that, whatever the political inconveniences, for cultural purposes two languages are better than one, and diversity is to be preferred to uniformity?

It has been said that war is too important to be left to the military. May I suggest that culture is too important to be left to the uncultured, or, to put it more charitably, to those who have shown no previous interest in culture.

That means that those of us who are involved in the arts will have to be more aggressive, more outspoken, more persistent, in expressing our viewpoint. Your Chairman has invited the participants at this conference to suggest what we want the Canadian Music Council to do. Here is my request.

I would like the Council to encourage its members, and particularly those who have earned national and international reputations in their field, to seize every opportunity, in private and in public, to insist

- that music and the other arts have a place in every community and must be the concern of every level of government;

- that the cultural question is fundamental to our current crisis of national unity, not only to Quebec's perception of the rest of Canada but to every Canadian's perception of this fragmented country;

- that our response to the forces which are pulling us apart should not be a further fragmentation of responsibilities, but reinforcement of those cultural activities which bring us together and which help us to understand one another;

- and, finally, that a government which wishes to strengthen the fabric of the country and to reaffirm its belief in the values which we share as Canadians should substantially increase the resources which it invests in our artists and arts organizations.

In his speech in Winnipeg the Prime Minister argued that the election of November 15 compels us to make this a better country. Characteristically, the examples he mentioned were economic - to provide better management in government, to reduce unemployment and to improve the economy. Well and good as far as it goes. But it does not go to the heart of the matter. Man does not live by bread alone. There is more to Canada than freight rates, equalization payments and regional economic development. There is a non-material dimension to this country, as to all countries, and it requires attention and support. This is the message which must be conveyed to our political leaders and to the Canadian public.

History teaches us that some countries are held together by natural boundaries, by military force or by

fear of a common oppressor; others must rely on economic convenience or the less tangible but more enduring bonds of a common culture. As Canadians we should recognize that economic convenience will not suffice. The arts can transcend linguistic and regional boundaries. Only by making sure that they flourish can we preserve and enrich the community we know as Canada.

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